

# **Paradox Valley Heirloom Foods and Native Seed Grow-Out Project**

**Location of Project:** Bedrock, Colorado (Western Region)

**Purpose:** Using endangered Native American and pioneer heirloom food crops and organic methods, the Native Seeds/SEARCH organization hoped to initiate restoration of overgrazed floodplain to healthy farmland in western Colorado. The organization anticipated that regional heirloom crops would be more resistant to drought, heat, and pests, which would permit lower impact gardening and reduce reliance on irrigation. To facilitate the spread of heirloom agriculture, the organization cultivated heirloom summer vegetables to sell at farmers markets, where growers could share gardening information one-on-one with consumers, and relate the importance of:

- Open pollination;
- Seed-saving;
- The conservation work of Native Seeds/SEARCH;
- Native horticultural knowledge; and
- The high nutritional content of heirloom varieties.

**Accomplishments:** A Native Seeds/SEARCH representative sold heirloom summer vegetables and held discussions with 1,100 interested consumers at 26 farmers markets in Moab, UT, Blanding, UT, and Ridgway, CO during the summers of 2000 and 2001. He also shared information about organic gardening with heirloom seeds, nutrition, traditional recipes, and cultural knowledge. Another 600 people were reached at 12 farmers markets and 2 workshops in Tucson, AZ during the winter season of 2000-2001. As a result of these activities, an estimated 400 seed catalogs were given out over a 17-month period, along with hundreds of recipes, brochures, and a list of contacts for additional networking purposes.

**Lessons Learned:** The outreach aspect of this project was highly successful. These outreach activities consisted of:

- Hands-on programs at the local charter school;
- Seed saving demonstrations at farmers markets featuring fresh winter squash;
- Craft workshops using materials from the garden; and
- Food preparation and canning workshops

The market and workshop venues were very useful for communicating educational messages and for scheduling events.

Through cooperation with the local farmers markets, the

organization was able to create a local market niche for heirloom foods. Local residents appeared interested in experimenting with new heirloom bean varieties, heirloom spices, and winter squash.

However, the labor requirement of this project also made it difficult to sustain. One person, with an occasional volunteer or paid helper, was not capable of sustaining a project of this scope. When there was more than one person in the garden, the manual work, such as moving a heavy discharge hose, went much more smoothly and rapidly. The ability to get regular paid help is critical so that the heavy, awkward loading and unloading required for farmers market participation can be handled adequately. Several family members, or a small cooperative group with a mutually vested interest in market success, would be an ideal size to handle the amount of work involved.

Transporting produce from rural areas to farmers markets was also difficult. Access to a processing facility, within a 2-3 hour drive, where organic produce could have been flash-frozen, chopped, and packaged, would have greatly facilitated the marketability of products. The experience at the farmers market indicated that raw heirloom foods, unless they were easy to prepare or ready-to-eat,

were typically only purchased by unusually experienced or open-minded cooks, not the average buyer, thus limiting sales volumes.

**Conclusion:**

Despite great consumer interest, sales of the heirloom foods were not sufficient enough to pay the expense of transporting the products to the market. It was necessary to supplement farmers market income by selling artwork, Native crafts, and herbs. Of all the heirloom produce items offered at the market, colorful, rare dry beans were the best market sellers.

The primary success of this project was the outreach to hundreds of people who were exposed to eating, and will hopefully soon grow, their own heirloom foods.